

Gov. Signs Bill Exempting Marconi From Wage Law

by Debra Lawless, Cape Cod Chronicle 11/19/09

The Chatham Marconi Maritime Center (CMMC) will save over \$125,000 in renovation costs to its Orleans Road museum thanks to a bill Gov. Deval Patrick signed into law last Friday.

The bill exempts CMMC, as a small non-profit, from paying the prevailing wage and allows it to hire local contractors, State Representative Sarah Peake announced last Saturday morning during the group's seventh annual meeting. Peake was instrumental in ushering the bill through the political process.

"This is a project that on a personal level I find so exciting," Peake said. "I'm looking forward to the ribbon cutting."

The organization is raising money to create the museum in the former operations building at the Marconi campus, once one of the country's most important ship-to-shore radio stations. The town-owned site on the shore of Ryder's Cove was built in 1914 by Guglielmo Marconi and played a role in many historic communications until its closing in the late 1990s.

Over 100 people braved drizzly weather to meet in the community center to hear 90 minutes of updates on the strides the CMMC has made this year toward opening its museum. The group hopes to have a museum up and running by next summer.

"We're taking a whole new direction now that we've got this bill passed," said incoming president Charles Bartlett.

Community preservation fund-financed exterior renovations to the former operations building at the town-owned Marconi campus, as well as other structures located there, are nearly complete. But the buildings need to be made handicapped accessible and brought into conformance with today's safety standards. The campus needs to have a redesigned entrance and egress, better parking, and a new septic system to earn a certificate of occupancy, Bartlett said. On Monday of this week the community preservation committee (CPC) was due to discuss \$446,654 in funds to finance the outdoor work (see separate story). If the CPC approves the request it will be presented to voters at the annual

town meeting either next May or at a special town meeting earlier.

The CMMC also hopes to have a lease from the town in hand by Christmas.

So what will the operations building museum ultimately look like? The group recently engaged Wondercabinet Interpretive Design of Lexington, which has created several exhibits for the National Park Service, to design its exhibits.

"Your site is an artifact," said Wondercabinet's Sari Boren, referring to the campus's 13 acres of radio antennas and historic buildings. "We'll tell the story in the place where it occurred."

In Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries wealthy people devoted whole rooms to "spectacles of man laid out next to spectacles of God," Boren said. These rooms, called Wonder Cabinets, inspired the name of Boren's company and also inspire a history and culture museum such as the CMMC.

Visitors to the CMMC's "Wonder Cabinet" will be able to touch keys, keyboards, microphones, giant operations center consoles and ship's consoles --- just as the operators at WCC did. They'll feel what it was like to be on a ship at sea isolated from the world and they'll hear what it was like to receive a distress signal while working at the radio station.

Visitors "can role play," Boren said, by practicing Morse Code and sending messages to others in the museum. Anticipated attendees include both residents and summer visitors, some of the 690,000 radio enthusiasts in the U.S., and children in school groups. Exhibits will be equally suitable for one person, a family group or a large group.

Exhibits will highlight the heyday of the station in the 1950s and 1960s when operators were on duty 24 hours a day; the Navy years of World Wars I and II when the station was a military listening post; and the earliest days of the 1920s, said Read Moffett, chair of the CMMC exhibit committee.

"The idea that this site and these buildings are such a significant artifact and still in the shape it was in since 1914 --- it's phenomenal," said Frank Messina, chair of the renovation committee. Messina noted

that restoration of the site began with the efforts spearheaded by resident Norman Pacun in listing the site on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. Residents Olive and Charles Cahoon were instrumental in forming a group that ultimately urged voters at a 1999 town meeting to purchase both the Marconi campus and its South Chatham annex, along with acres of beachfront and marsh at Forest Beach, for less than \$1 million. Messina also praised CMMC past president Roslyn Coleman for "keeping us on the straight and narrow."

Between 1999 and 2001, unfortunately, the buildings deteriorated and were subject to vandalism. Last summer windows were repaired, reglazed or replaced; gutters and downspouts replaced with authentic copper in antique designs; flashing and soffits replaced or restored; and the concrete and brickwork repointed. Inside, ceiling tiles were removed and the ceilings raised to their original heights.

In the coming months the CMMC will consider its needs for volunteers to work as docents, in the gift shop and operating the museum. In addition, the CMMC has extended an arm into education, helping to send four Chatham teachers to a seminar at the Museum of Science in Boston.

Until Dec. 31 it is still possible to join the CMMC as a charter member, Bartlett said. He noted that the group has \$265,762 on hand, up from \$216,478 the previous year. In addition, the CMMC's three-year capital campaign has raised \$285,000 with pledges still outstanding. Finally, the group unanimously approved a slate of officers naming Bartlett president, Messina first vice president, Moffett second vice president, Coleman past president and chair of communications, Leonard Magnusson treasurer, Edwin C. Moxon secretary, and Edee G. Crowell corresponding secretary.

After the annual meeting, board member Barbara Cotnam led tours of the Chatham Port campus.

"All of us benefit by having a year-round attraction that is an educational resource," said Rob Leiden, who spoke about the CMMC's vision for the future.